

## The Playground

Christopher Brown, holes in shoes, shirt too small. Christopher Brown, boots on feet, two steps forward. Christopher Brown, arm winds back, release.

Maddison Clarke, receiving end. Maddison Clarke, ball to the head.

Only the brave survive the playground. Maddison Clarke was not brave. She skirted the edges of the equipment. She walked like a ghost. Maddison Clarke wasn't brave.

The bell was a saviour- students raced back to the classroom, eager to win the race. Christopher among them, they'd race down from the playground, through the concrete courtyard, up the door and down the halls. Maddison was last. She never won the race. She'd watch the other students climb from the monkey bars, slip down the slide, and catapult off the swings. She'd count to twenty then follow too. Her little legs could go quite fast- when she let them, of course. Her legs carried her away from the playground-and she smiled because she was leaving it.

Only the brave survived in the playground. Madison Clarke wasn't brave.

Next break, and the bell rang again, children burst out the classroom doors, birds from a cage, they flew down the halls and out to the playground again.

"Here, Chris!" Danny yelled as he roughly jammed a football in Christopher's hands, and with a mischievous smile, dug an elbow into Chris's side. All the boys started off with him, jostling Chris's hair and bumping the small boy around. He smiled unconvincingly, and swung open the door leading to the courtyard.

"C'mon, Chris, you're one of us now." Danny snickered. Another chimed, "You're one of the *boys!*" Christopher looked at his boots with holes, then back to face Danny. Chris shrugged "Yeah..." "What do you mean 'yeah...' you're our little ally, now toss us the ball!"

Targets were best found by the swings, the boys knew, so that's where they went- by the sandpit they stood, behind the swings, tossing the football between them. They watched over their kingdom, for they didn't rule the outside world, but could stand on top of the monkey bars and decree those who would suffer.

Christopher stood with the rest of the monarchy.

"Oi, Chris, see what we mean? Us boys' rule!" Danny spat. He threw a strong arm around Chris's shoulders and swayed the small boy side to side.

Chris forced a chuckle and slapped Danny's back to try and show his support. He gazed across the yard. Many of the boys, dubbed knights by their leaders, fought with innocent civilians to uphold their dignity.

“Hey! Stop!” Chris heard someone squeak. He held his head up and looked around. Which knight was overstepping his bounds?

A boy on the other side of the yard hurled a football at a little girl. The boy laughed as she fell. Something tickled at his chest and Chris balled a fist, before taking a breath. He thought of Madison. Madison Clarke, ball to the head. Madison Clarke, never a word. Madison Clarke, holds back tears, walks like a ghost. Christopher shook his head violently to shake the thought away.

The boys were already starting off with the football, packed together, an army they were. Danny at the front, they all laughed, bumping against each other and off each other and bickering between themselves. Danny had spotted Madison. Christopher had spotted Danny.

Christopher Brown could be brave.

Danny hurled the football, the first blow. Madison shielded her face and turned her back as another boy tossed a second ball. It bounced from her shoulder. A third ball was flung at her. Madison spun back around, as if to hit it away from herself. Instead she fell. The boys laughed.

Danny handed Chris a ball.

“Take a shot!” he laughed.

Chris glanced at the ball, then Danny. He hurriedly threw the ball as far as he could in the opposite direction. Christopher Brown, one step, two steps, frantically pushing aside the rest of the Monarchy. Christopher Brown, two steps more.

He held out a hand to Madison Clarke and helped her off the ground.

“Chris what the hell are you doing!” the boys roared, unsettlement growing within the group. Chris reached into his pocket and from within its depths, drew out a small daisy.

He scratched his head sheepishly with the other hand as he watched Madison carefully take the flower. She smiled carefully. Christopher watched her turn away.

‘Thankyou’ she whispered. Madison Clarke held the daisy to her chest and ran. Her legs carried her away from the playground, and she smiled because she was leaving it. This time she left with something that wasn’t a bruise. She ran until she reached the concrete courtyard, went to the furthest end and sat on a bench, looking back on the mob of boys stirring around Chris. Her eyes watched as Danny grasped Chris’s collar. He growled something into his face. They swarmed around him, engulfing him in a sea of hands and boots and bodies. He was standing but when they left he was curled on the ground. It took him a minute or so until he clambered up and he looked about before hanging his head. He left the playground.

Only the mean ruled in the playground. Christopher Brown was not mean.

He strolled down the path towards Madison, who only eyed him intently.

“Do you like flowers?” Christopher asked quietly, sliding onto the bench beside her.

“I do now.” Madison murmured.

It was that afternoon Madison got home.

“Madison!” her father yelled, slamming the bottle in his hand onto the counter. “Get over here!”  
She wove her way through the mess toward him.

“What the hell are you smiling for?!”

Madison put her hand to her dress pocket and an outline of a daisy met her fingertips. A grin pricked at her lips.

“It's nothing, Father.” She whispered.